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Reimagining Indian Knowledge Systems through the works of Heinrich Zimmer: An Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Analysis

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Abstract

This paper re-examines Heinrich Zimmer's 'Philosophies of India' and shows why it is still important for understanding Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in today's global context. Zimmer's work brings together different fields such as Indology, philosophy, art history, and mythology. In doing so, it connects with the ideas of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, especially its focus on interdisciplinary learning and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in modern education. Using Wilhelm Halbfass's idea of dialogue between India and the West, the paper argues that Zimmer was not just a scholar of India but also a mediator who tried to explain Indian philosophy in its own cultural terms. The paper studies Zimmer's interpretations of major Indian traditions like Vedanta, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, and Tantra. It shows that instead of dividing them into strict categories, Zimmer highlights how philosophy is closely linked with myth, art, and ritual. This approach is connected to Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory, which explains how knowledge is preserved not only through texts but also through symbols and practices. At the same time, the paper critically examines Zimmer's work using ideas from Edward Said and Dominick LaCapra, pointing out some limitations shaped by early twentieth-century European thinking. Using qualitative analysis and close reading, the paper concludes that Zimmer's work is still relevant today. It helps us think about Indian Knowledge Systems, decolonizing knowledge, and interdisciplinary education in a more inclusive and meaningful way, in line with the goals of NEP 2020.

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge Systems, cultural memory, critical historiography, decolonizing knowledge, interdisciplinary education.*

Introduction

Heinrich Zimmer's Philosophies of India, edited by Joseph Campbell and published posthumously in 1951, is a landmark in the field of Indian philosophy, now needing to be revisited in context of current Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Zimmer, a German Indologist and art historian of South Asia, transcended disciplinary boundaries to integrate philosophy, mythology, art, and rituals in studying Indian thought. Rather than categorise ideas, he emphasised the interconnectedness between these areas, allowing readers to appreciate Indian traditions as a living, symbolic and integrated form of knowledge. This interdisciplinary approach resonates strongly with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which calls for incorporating indigenous knowledge in contemporary education to foster holistic learning that is culturally relevant, rather than purely Western, disciplinary approaches.

Zimmer's work was written at a critical time of cultural exchange between India and the West, and reflects Wilhelm Halbfass's notion of a "dialogical encounter," in which traditions meet and communicate with each other in a mutually respectful way (Halbfass, 1988). Zimmer sought to tell the story of Indian

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philosophy from its own cultural and symbolic standpoint, rather than through the lens of Western interpretations. He was not a passive observer, but an idealistic translator, who noted important Indian concepts like cyclical time (samsāra), multiple ways of release (mokṣa), and the integration of spiritual knowledge (jñāna) and practical knowledge (vidyā). His accounts of Vedānta, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga and Tantra underline their links with myth, art and ritual. This view accords with Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, which conceives knowledge as a dynamic process of communication through symbols, rituals and practices rather than just texts. Zimmer's accounts of temple sculpture and yogic practices exemplify ways of preserving and transmitting philosophical knowledge (Assmann, 2011).

In today's context of decolonising knowledge systems, Zimmer's perspective is helpful for achieving the objectives of NEP 2020, especially in the realms of ethical, inclusive and holistic education. Emphasising the integration of theory and practice, he challenges Western dualities between "sacred" and "secular" knowledge and promotes a diverse worldview where multiple mārgas (paths) lead to liberation. This approach is particularly important to the current discussions of epistemic justice, in which IKS seeks recognition at par with science and technology without being subsumed.

But a critical reappraisal is also in order. Through Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) and Dominick LaCapra's critical method of historiography, this work recognises that Zimmer was constrained by the intellectual milieu of early 20th century Europe. His romanticization and interpretive biases on Indian traditions display these constraints and serve as a warning not to accept his views naively. Through textual and intercultural analysis, this paper examines these challenges, and argues that despite these limitations, Zimmer's dialogue method offers insights into the way we can appreciate IKS today as a valuable bridge between tradition and modernity, and interdisciplinary and decolonised knowledge-making.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on Heinrich Zimmer's Philosophies of India hold a unique position in the fields of Indology, comparative philosophy, and cultural studies. His work connects early twentieth-century Orientalist scholarship with current efforts to develop decolonized systems of knowledge. Edited after his death by Joseph Campbell, Zimmer's major work presents Indian thought through mythology, philosophy, and art. Instead of following a linear historical narrative, he offers a rich, interconnected understanding of these traditions (Zimmer, 1951). Scholars have appreciated his vivid and symbolic portrayal of Indian philosophy, which highlights its close links with religion and ritual, in contrast to the analytical and logical style common in Western philosophy (Goodreads, Accessed 4 Feb. 2026). This broad and integrated approach anticipates modern ideas within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), although it also invites critical evaluation from postcolonial and historical perspectives.

A key framework for understanding Zimmer is provided by Wilhelm Halbfass's India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding, which views the relationship between Indian and European thought as a dialogue rather than a one-sided exchange. Halbfass explains how both cultures shaped their identities through interaction, especially during the period of Western influence. While Neo-Hindu thinkers adapted European ideas in response, India generally did not actively spread its traditions abroad (Halbfass, 1988). He highlights Europe's long-standing intellectual interest in India, from ancient philosophical borrowings to colonial-era scholarship, in contrast to Hinduism's inward spiritual focus. This perspective helps us see Zimmer as a cultural mediator who presents Indian vidyā to Western readers without fully absorbing it into Western frameworks. Halbfass's balanced approach also deepens our understanding of Zimmer's emphasis on multiple spiritual paths (mārgas) (Halbfass, 1988). Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory further supports this interpretation. He distinguishes between short-term communicative memory and long-term cultural memory, which is preserved through institutions, rituals, symbols, and texts over thousands of years (Assmann, 2008). Assmann argues that memory shapes cultural identity through festivals, religious practices, and symbolic forms (Assmann, 2006). Applied to Zimmer, this helps explain his view of Indian knowledge as embodied

in ritual and imagery, such as Tantric symbols, rather than confined to sacred texts (śruti). This approach aligns closely with IKS, which values performative and lived forms of knowledge.

Postcolonial perspectives provide an important critical dimension. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism reveals how Western scholarship often portrayed the East in exotic and idealized ways, shaped by power relations. Zimmer, at times, reflects this tendency through romantic interpretations. Similarly, Dominick LaCapra emphasizes the need to situate intellectual work within its historical and cultural context. From this view, some of Zimmer's interpretations, such as his selective focus on Vedānta can be seen as influenced by early twentieth-century European intellectual movements (LaCapra, 1983). Recent scholarship also points out Zimmer's strong influence on Joseph Campbell's theory of myth, while noting that his interpretations sometimes lack historical precision. Discussions surrounding NEP 2020 similarly stress the importance of integrating IKS into education while remaining alert to colonial biases (NEP, 2020). Despite this growing body of research, significant gaps remain. Few studies bring together the perspectives of Halbfass, Assmann, Said, and LaCapra to examine Zimmer's work in a comprehensive way, and his relevance to contemporary digital memory cultures has been largely overlooked. This paper seeks to address these gaps through intercultural close reading, highlighting Zimmer's continuing value for developing ethical and dialogical approaches to IKS within the framework of NEP 2020.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses an integrated theoretical framework drawn from intercultural philosophy, memory studies, postcolonial theory, and critical historiography to examine Heinrich Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* as a space where Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are shaped through dialogue. At the center of this framework is Wilhelm Halbfass's idea of the "dialogical encounter" between India and Europe, which avoids simple oppositions and instead emphasizes mutual interaction and understanding. In *India and Europe*, Halbfass describes Europe's active search for Indian ideas from ancient contacts to colonial scholarship, while Hindu traditions largely responded in inward and reflective ways, shaped by unequal power relations. He stresses the importance of careful engagement with original texts to represent indigenous voices faithfully. Within this perspective, scholars like Zimmer appear as cultural mediators who interpret Indian thought for Western audiences while trying to preserve its distinctiveness. This approach helps explain Zimmer's integrated presentation of Vedānta and Tantra as part of a broader, pluralistic vision of IKS that aligns with the intercultural goals of NEP 2020.

Alongside this, Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory helps clarify Zimmer's emphasis on myth, art, and ritual (Assmann, 2011). Assmann distinguishes between short-term communicative memory, which is passed down orally across a few generations, and long-term cultural memory, which is preserved through rituals, texts, monuments, and symbols over thousands of years. He argues that cultural identity is maintained through symbolic practices such as festivals, images, and performances(Assmann, 2008). In the Indian context, this appears in practices like *darśana* (sacred viewing of deities) and yogic *samādhi*, where knowledge is experienced and enacted rather than merely expressed in words. This framework supports Zimmer's view that philosophy in India cannot be separated from ritual and artistic expression, encouraging an understanding of IKS as a living system of memory rather than a purely textual tradition (LaCapra, 1998). At the same time, critical perspectives from Edward Said and Dominick LaCapra provide important balance. Said's critique of Orientalism exposes how Western scholarship often created simplified and exotic images of the East, shaped by power relations. Applied to Zimmer, this perspective highlights moments where his romanticized portrayals risk reducing the complexity of Indian traditions, despite his dialogical intentions. LaCapra's approach to critical historiography further emphasizes that scholarly works are shaped by their historical and emotional contexts (LaCapra, 1983). He urges careful examination of hidden assumptions and ideological influences, including the intellectual climate of early twentieth-century Europe. This helps explain how aspects of Zimmer's thought reflect the spiritual and cultural movements of his time, reminding us to interpret his work critically rather than uncritically.

Taken together, these four perspectives form a balanced analytical framework. Halbfass and Assmann help reveal Zimmer's strengths in dialogue and cultural memory, while Said and LaCapra expose the limitations and biases in his approach. Methodologically, the study uses close reading and intercultural analysis, comparing Zimmer's interpretations with key Indian texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*, in order to maintain contextual accuracy and respect for *svadharma* (cultural and philosophical integrity).

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method that combines intercultural analysis and close textual reading to examine Heinrich Zimmer's Philosophies of India as a dialogical medium for Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Intercultural analysis focuses on understanding meanings within their cultural contexts and addresses unequal power relations between Eastern and Western traditions. It prioritizes indigenous ways of knowing, such as vidyā, rather than abstract and universal theories (Liamputtong, 2010). Close reading involves careful, detailed examination of Zimmer's interpretations of Vedānta, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, and Tantra, supported by comparison with primary Indian texts, including the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā, and Tantric āgamas. The main text studied is *Philosophies of India* (Princeton University Press, 1951), along with Zimmer's Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization. The analysis proceeds in several stages: first, identifying and describing how myth, art, and ritual are interconnected; second, interpreting key themes using Halbfass's concept of dialogue and Assmann's theory of cultural memory; and third, critically examining these interpretations through the perspectives of Edward Said's Orientalism and Dominick LaCapra's critical historiography. Reflexive practices, such as maintaining a positionality journal and adopting ethical sensitivity, help reduce researcher bias and ensure a respectful, decolonized approach, especially given the researcher's own cultural background. Overall, this method applies the theoretical framework effectively and provides useful insights for the interdisciplinary integration of IKS envisioned in NEP 2020.

Analysis of Zimmer's Interpretations

In *Philosophies of India*, Heinrich Zimmer moves away from traditional, rigid histories of doctrine and instead presents Indian traditions as a living and interconnected system in which philosophy, myth, art, and ritual function together (Zimmer, 1951). His holistic approach is especially clear in his discussion of Vedānta, where the Upaniṣadic idea of unity between *ātman* and *brahman* is not treated as abstract philosophy but as something experienced through temple imagery and yogic practices. Zimmer describes *ātman* not as a fixed soul but as the inner Self revealed through life's struggles and spiritual practice. This realization takes place through *darśana*, the meditative act of seeing the divine, where the difference between the observer and the observed disappears (Zimmer, 1951). Likewise, *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth, is not presented as merely pessimistic suffering but as a meaningful process shaped by mythic symbols, such as Viṣṇu's fish incarnations, which guide humanity through cosmic cycles of destruction and renewal.

In his interpretation of Buddhism, Zimmer avoids reducing it to nihilism and instead highlights its symbolic richness. He explains *śūnyatā* (emptiness) as a meaningful fullness, similar to non-dualism in Vedānta, where all distinctions dissolve into a luminous openness. His reading of Mahāyāna texts and Tantric diagrams shows how ritual and meditation bring these ideas to life. Through meditative visualization, practitioners imagine buddha figures as inner archetypes, dissolving the boundary between subject and object. This reflects Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory, where knowledge is preserved through ritual performance rather than only through written texts. Zimmer's descriptions of ritual practices, such as walking around stupas, show how wisdom is embodied and enacted (Assmann, 2011).

Zimmer applies a similar method to Jainism, emphasizing its principle of *anekāntavāda*, or many-sided truth, which supports a pluralistic worldview. The Jain ideal of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) extends from individual spiritual discipline to respect for all life, symbolized by the calm expressions of giant *tīrthaṅkara*

statues. He also connects these ideas with Tantric traditions, where spiritual energy rises through the body, uniting matter and spirit and challenging Western divisions between mind and body.

Yoga and Tantra represent the high point of Zimmer's interpretation. He presents yogic techniques not as physical exercises but as transformative spiritual practices that unite the individual with the cosmic Self. Tantric symbolism, especially the system of chakras and sacred rituals, shows how desire itself can become a path to spiritual realization. In the ritual of *maithuna* (sacred union), physical love is transformed into deep meditation, reflecting Zimmer's effort to explain Indian knowledge in its own symbolic and experiential terms (Halbfass, 1988).

Zimmer's method avoids strict theoretical systems and instead emphasizes metaphor, paradox, and symbolic meaning. Myths function as powerful expressions of philosophical ideas: Śiva's dance represents the rhythm of creation and destruction, while Kālī's terrifying yet maternal image symbolizes time and transformation. Art and ritual thus preserve sacred knowledge dynamically, rather than reducing it to written texts (Assmann, 2008). Different spiritual paths like the paths of knowledge, devotion, action, and meditation etc, are presented as equally valid routes toward liberation, reflecting the holistic spirit of IKS. This rich and inclusive interpretation supports the interdisciplinary goals of NEP 2020 by presenting education as a process of integrated understanding. However, critical concerns also arise. At times, Zimmer's symbolic interpretations romanticize Indian traditions and overlook social realities such as caste and gender hierarchies. His early twentieth-century European background also shapes his perspective, occasionally introducing Western philosophical ideas into his understanding of Indian concepts (Said, 1978). Overall, close reading of Zimmer's work reveals a powerful vision of Indian knowledge as living, dynamic, and dialogical which is capable of connecting tradition with modern thought, while also inviting further critical and decolonial reflection.

Critical Evaluation

Heinrich Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* represents an important effort at intercultural understanding, but because it was written in the early twentieth century, it also requires critical examination using postcolonial and historical perspectives. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism provides a key framework for this critique. According to Said, Western scholarship often portrays India as an exotic and timeless land of spiritual wisdom, shaped by unequal power relations. Some of Zimmer's interpretations reflect this tendency, especially when he presents Tantra as a universal spiritual path or *samsāra* as a timeless philosophical paradox, without fully considering social and historical realities. In doing so, he sometimes overlooks issues such as caste hierarchy and gender inequality found in religious traditions. His strong focus on Brahmanical and Vedāntic traditions also marginalizes alternative perspectives, including critical voices from Buddhist and Jain traditions, and reflects a colonial preference for viewing India mainly as a spiritual rather than social or material civilization. Dominick LaCapra's approach to critical historiography deepens this critique by emphasizing the importance of understanding scholars within their historical contexts (LaCapra, 1983). Zimmer wrote during the interwar period in Germany, a time influenced by romantic nationalism and spiritual movements. This background shaped his interpretation of suffering (*duḥkha*), often presenting it as tragic and pessimistic rather than as a dynamic and transformative process known as *leela* (divine play). His reliance on earlier European translations, especially those by Max Müller, further reflects philological and cultural biases, privileging Sanskrit texts while neglecting vernacular devotional traditions and regional cultures. Although Zimmer avoided overt claims of Western superiority, his symbolic interpretations sometimes blur historical distinctions, merging ideas from different periods without sufficient contextual separation (Zimmer, 1951).

Despite these limitations, Zimmer's work remains valuable. In contrast to Said's more sweeping critique, Wilhelm Halbfass's idea of intercultural dialogue supports viewing Zimmer as a genuine mediator who sought to represent Indian knowledge on its own symbolic terms (Halbfass, 1988). By emphasizing concepts such as cyclical time through Viṣṇu's incarnations and Jain pluralism through religious imagery, Zimmer encouraged meaningful cross-cultural understanding rather than simple appropriation. Jan

Assmann's theory of cultural memory further supports Zimmer's emphasis on ritual and art as key carriers of knowledge, highlighting how temples and worship practices preserve philosophical ideas beyond written texts. Unlike scholars who dismissed Indian philosophy as irrational, Zimmer defended its symbolic and metaphorical modes of thinking as legitimate ways of knowing. In the context of NEP 2020, Zimmer's integrated vision of knowledge that brings together paths of wisdom (*jñāna*), devotion (*bhakti*), and action (*karma*), offers valuable insights for developing a decolonized and inclusive educational framework. However, his ideas must be applied critically and historically. By combining his interpretations with social reforms in the areas of regionalism, caste and gender equality, and by using modern digital tools, a more plural and balanced IKS curriculum can be developed. In this way, Zimmer should be seen not as an unquestionable authority but as a thoughtful mediator whose work can still inspire ethical and dialogical engagement between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

Heinrich Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* remains an important work, though historically shaped, for rethinking Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in line with the goals of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes interdisciplinary and decolonized education. Through his dialogical approach, inspired by intercultural exchange, Zimmer moves beyond narrow and stereotypical interpretations of Indian thought. He presents Vedānta, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, and Tantra not as separate systems, but as closely connected traditions that express *vidyā*, or integrated knowledge, where philosophy, myth, art, and ritual work together. Supported by Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory, Zimmer's approach highlights Indian traditions as living systems of knowledge, preserved through temples, rituals, and symbolic practices rather than only through written texts. This analysis highlights Zimmer's strengths. By avoiding rigid classifications, he presents *samsāra* as a meaningful and transformative process, emphasizes multiple spiritual paths leading toward *mokṣa*, and shows how Tantric symbolism transforms desire into spiritual awareness. For NEP 2020, this offers useful ideas for education, encouraging curricula that combine knowledge, devotion, and ethical action instead of separating disciplines too strictly. Zimmer's focus on symbolic experience also points toward new possibilities in the digital age, where technologies such as virtual temple visits or digital tools for studying sacred texts can help preserve and share cultural memory more widely. At the same time, critical perspectives from Edward Said and Dominick LaCapra remind us of the limitations of Zimmer's work. Influenced by early twentieth-century European romanticism, his interpretations sometimes idealize Indian traditions and overlook social issues such as caste and gender inequalities.

In conclusion, Zimmer should not be seen as an unquestionable authority, but as a thoughtful mediator who helps build a bridge between tradition and modern thought. His work encourages meaningful dialogue and supports the development of sustainable and inclusive knowledge systems. This study also points to future research possibilities, including digital humanities projects and classroom-based studies under NEP 2020, to further develop decolonized approaches to Indian knowledge while respecting cultural integrity.

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